About the only way anybody can be shocked nowadays is to be hit by lightning

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Green Sheet

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It's not your typical pizza place

By Gerald Kloss
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It must happen once in a while. Somebody comes into the ShowBiz Pizza Place at 7401 W. Good Hope Rd., next to the Melody Top Theater, orders a pizza and just sits around, twiddling his thumbs and staring at the wall, waiting for his order to get done. A customer like that must drive the management nuts.

Because the whole idea of the big (10,400 square feet) restaurant, which opened in late July, is that getting a pizza should be FUN. It should be a family night out, a celebration, a whoopee time of finger-snapping delight for young and old. In a variation of the old "Sell the sizzle, not the steak" motto, this one says, "All this, and pizza, too!"

So what's there to do while your $10.95, 14-inch super combo pizza of cheese, sausage, beef, pepperoni, olives, onions, mushrooms and green peppers is moving through the endless-belt electric oven in the kitchen?

57 games

The carpeted Game Room has 57 — count 'em, 57 — games, including 10 Skeeball alleys and several clusters of stand-up electronic games of the Space Invader, zap-the-enemy-before-he-zaps-you variety. (The most popular one right now is Pac-Man, in which you steer your colored dot through a maze, eating up other colored dots along the way and avoiding pursuit by still other colored dots. Palm-sweating! White-knuckling! FUN!)

If that palls (or the pizza is ready), it's off to the 200-seat Show Room, where a new three-to-four minute segment of bubblegum rock music and slapstick comedy is provided every eight minutes by a stageful of life-sized "electroanimated" animal characters, including a keyboard-playing gorilla, a dog drummer, a bear guitarist and a mouse vocalist. To see all 11 routines by the comic "Rock-Afire Explosion" assemblage would take more than two hours.

Another dining area, the Sports Room, features wide-screen TV and a quieter decor.

A bar serves wine and beer as well as soft drinks, and there's even a gift shop where you can get a stuffed animal as a memento of that wild and crazy night at the pizza parlor.



—Journal Photo

An electronic animal band entertains customers at ShowBiz Pizza Place

Isn't all this a little, um, jazzy for solid, conservative Milwaukee?

"Not at all," said manager Norm Case, who ran a Red Barn restaurant before getting into ShowBiz Pizza. "This is the fastest-growing food franchise in the country. The first one opened in March 1980, and by the end of this year, there should be 44 to 48 of them around the nation.

"Our place was the 18th in the country when it first opened late in May, but we had to shut down a few days later because of a snafu over the bar license. That was a setback, because a lot of people turned up only to find the doors closed. But we're open for good now, and the chain plans to have four places in the Milwaukee area, with the next one scheduled to open in September at 27th and Layton."

No take-outs

What's different about running a place like this, Norm?

"Well, for one thing, we have a full-time electronics expert, Al Brooks, to keep the games in shape and the Show Room band running. And we had to take a 3½-week course at ShowBiz College in Topeka, Kan., to learn the operation. It was no snap, either — they ran our tails off 10 hours a day. Among other things, we had to learn to operate every one of those electronic games out there so we could coach customers who got hung up."

Wow. Anything else?

"No take-out orders, and nobody under 18 without parents — we're family-oriented. You buy game tokens for a quarter each when you come in, and you get free tokens with each food order — three free ones for a large pizza, for example. All our pizzas are made to order, with any topping you want. Ever had a Hawaiian pizza — cheese, ham, pineapple and toasted almonds? Terrific!"

Pizza, you've come a long way, baby.



—Journal Photo

ShowBiz Pizza, with its 57 games, caters to families

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